The Borderless World According to Bloggers: Prosumers, Produsers, Creatives and Post-Consumers Tell their Side of the Communications Story

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Introduction

The shift to social media or Web 2.0 has been greeted as a revolution and a new paradigm by communications professionals and academics alike (Miller & Lammas 2010; Mangold & Faults 2009; Meerman Scott 2011). Based on its interactive features, Web 2.0 arguably reinforces Grunig's notion of two-way symmetrical communication as best practice in public relations (Grunig 2009). Web 2.0 has been defined as "a collection of open-source, interactive and user-controlled online applications expanding the experiences, knowledge and market power of the users as participants in business and social processes. Web2.0 applications support the creation of informal users' networks facilitating the flow of ideas and knowledge by allowing the efficient generation, dissemination, sharing and editing/refining of informational content" (Constantinides & Fountain 2008, p. 232). It is acknowledged that the terms Web 2.0 and social media are often seen as interchangeable and that Web 2.0's definition is still the subject of controversy (Constaninides & Fountain 2008). Social media is defined as "internet services where the online content is generated by the users of the service" (Cann, Dimitriou & Hooley 2011, p. 7).

Despite the suggestion that social media allows more interactive, symmetrical communication between organisations and their stakeholders, a substantial portion of the literature on Web 2.0 has focused, consciously or not, on the notion of control and has used a practitioner perspective. For example, in an article on social media and its implications for viral marketing, Miller and Lammas suggest:

Before constructing social media strategies, marketers must ask themselves: how can we engage consumers to promote products to specific communities in a credible, controlled and cost effective way (2010, p 3)?

Similarly, Macnamara (2010) in a qualitative study of senior practitioners found "loss of control" was expressed as one of the major challenges associated with social media. The notion of control was found to be a theme among PRIA registered consultants in in-depth interviews conducted by Archer and Wolf (2011), with a comment from one consultant whose clients were active on Twitter and in the blogosphere:

> *"I think it's just being really careful. You don't have a hell of a lot of control over social media. I think you just need to analyse whether or not it suits the client."*

With public relations practitioners and marketers' concern over control, it has been suggested that active users of social media are "the new influencers" (Gillin 2008; Trammell & Keshelashvili 2005; Woods 2005) and, as creators of their own material on-line, they are also "prosumers", ie. both creators and consumers (Tofler 1980, Kotler 1986).

This study investigates the in-depth viewpoints of a select group of the new influencers/prosumers – Australian mum and dad bloggers, also known among their community as "digital parents". Bloggers write blogs (short for web logs). Blogs are defined as websites which are produced by individuals in a diary format and presented in reverse chronological order. Blogs usually include text, photographs, videos and links to other blogs and web pages (van Heerden, salehi-Sangari, Pitt & Caruana 2009).

This research seeks to discover just how "symmetrical" communication is between public relations practitioners/brand communicators and bloggers within Australia, using a descriptive approach. This study responds to Macnamara's (2010) call for ethnographic methods and interviews to investigate, among other areas, the levels of interactivity, the issues of control and ethics in social media which are seen to be topical but far from resolved.

Blogs – Important for Consumers and Organisations

Bloggers, as new influencers, are being courted by organisations keen to cut through the clutter and connect with their consumers through an influential third party (Ashley & Leonard 2009; Macnamara 2010). The sheer number of blogs is significant and is increasing daily (Kerr, Mortimer, Dickinson & Waller 2012). By the end of 2011, NMIncite, a Nielsen/McKinsey company, tracked over 181 million blogs around the world, up from 36 million only five years earlier in 2006 (see nmincite.com). Blogs as a genre are becoming increasingly important for consumers and organisations (Sepp, Liljander & Gummerus 2011). Blogs are important for consumers as they are read for entertainment and information and are perceived as trustworthy (Armstrong & McAdams 2009; Brown et al. 2007). For organisations, blogs and bloggers are important because they can quickly spread information and opinion about organisations and products (Jones, Temperley & Lima 2009). After conducting a thorough literature review of marketing research on bloggers to date, Sepp et al. (2011) concluded that bloggers have a substantial influence on their readers' behaviour.

Bloggers as Prosumers

The concept of 'prosumers', consumers who are also producers, was discussed long before social media existed (Tofler 1980; Kotler 1986). Writing in the mid-1980s, Kotler (1986) forecast that: "As society moves towards the post-industrial age, so will the number of pure consumers decline. They will be replaced by prosumers, people who produce many of their own goods and services (Kotler, 1986, p. 510)." He argued that prosumers should be looked at as another market segment(s) and marketers should identify those who have a strong need to produce their own goods and "figure out ways in which marketers can help them meet this need" (Kotler 1986, p. 513). With the rise of social media, the title of prosumers has now been applied to social media users in general and bloggers in particular (e.g., Varey & McKie 2010; Pihl & Wahlqvist 2010; Macnamara 2010; Kerr, Mortimera, Dickinson-Delaporte & Waller 2012). Individual bloggers independently produce and promote content for and to their readers, usually without backing from employers. Within marketing and public relations the new prosumer is heralded as an empowered consumer, able to defeat large organisations with a single blog post (see, for example, Hamelin 2011; Kucuk 2009; Weber 2009). It has even been argued that "blogging's ultimate product is empowerment" (Kline & Burstein 2005, p. 248).

However, some sociologists have suggested that prosumers may not be truly empowered consumers and producers. It has been posited that the democratisation of the internet and power for consumers turned producers is an illusion or 'infectious rhetoric' (Beer & Burrows 2007; Beer 2008; Cammaerts 2008; Chia 2011; Comor 2010). For example, Comor (2010) argued that prosumers' engagement mostly serves status quo interests and prosumers are actually being exploited. He went on to suggest that the empowered blogging prosumer is a fantasy and that prosumers are the subject of hegemony (Comor 2010 p. 323). Comor (2010) takes particular issue with marketers and marketing academics for their promotion of the concept of the empowered prosumer.

In this study, we conducted 15 in-depth interviews with bloggers who mostly write blogs relating to their role as parents. Nine of these bloggers accepted paid display advertising and "sponsored posts" and two use their blogs predominantly for business purposes but do not accept advertising or sponsorship. The study also uses "netnography", on-line ethnography, (Kozinets 2002) of the same bloggers' own sites.

Conclusion

Findings from the study show that Australian marketers and public relations practitioners representing major multinationals and smaller to medium enterprises are actively seeking to influence bloggers, who are seen to be gate-keepers and influencers. Industry tactics include provision of free products and services, and social events for bloggers, with the aim of (disclosed and undisclosed) endorsement or at least favourable commentary. However, there appears to be some disconnect between what bloggers expect in return for their posts about organisations and their services or products and what public relations practitioners are willing to provide. While some Australian bloggers are actively seeking sponsorship and paid "product reviews" which are often but not always disclosed, others are eschewing the sponsorship model of monetization (consciously or unconsciously) for their blogs to pursue a) their own personal goals (for example to connect with other parents or to simply write creatively for an audience) or b) business goals relevant to their blogs. This paper concludes with further questions regarding the current lack of any regulations on ethical practice within the blogosphere, particularly from the blogger, but also from the organisational side. We also outline a model of blogger motivations and influences and provide directions for further research.

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